

The Neighborhood Digital Engagement Toolkit

A collaboration between SOAR, the
City of South Bend, and enFocus





Welcome to the toolkit!

AN INTRODUCTION TO DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is adapting to different forms of engagement. We are changing the ways in which we connect with one another and engage in our communities. More than ever, it is important for neighborhood associations to adapt to these global changes and connect with their communities in virtual spaces. That means creating opportunities to connect with people digitally, through platforms like Zoom or Google Meet, or simply through options for conference calls.

But the big question remains: how do we do it?

In collaboration with enFocus and the City of South Bend, the Southeast Organized Area Residents neighborhood association (SOAR) piloted a digital approach to community engagement. This pilot helped to show what works, what doesn't, and what resources are available to other neighborhood associations.

From this pilot, the Neighborhood Digital Engagement Toolkit was born. This Toolkit is a guide for neighborhood associations interested in expanding their civic reach through digital platforms. The Toolkit is a reference of tested methods, drawn from SOAR's pilot experience, that will help you to digitally engage neighbors in your community.



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ONE: THE PILOT

What did SOAR
do?



Pilot Project Structure

SOAR had three questions they were interested in answering:



What does engagement in our neighborhood look like?

Action step: Connect and collaborate with neighborhood residents to find out:

1. How do residents like to engage with their city and neighborhood?
2. What neighborhood issues are of the most importance to residents?



How can we encourage and cultivate civic and digital literacy?

Action step: Generate creative events and programs that combine greater community engagement with digital skills so that residents can participate in and learn from both.

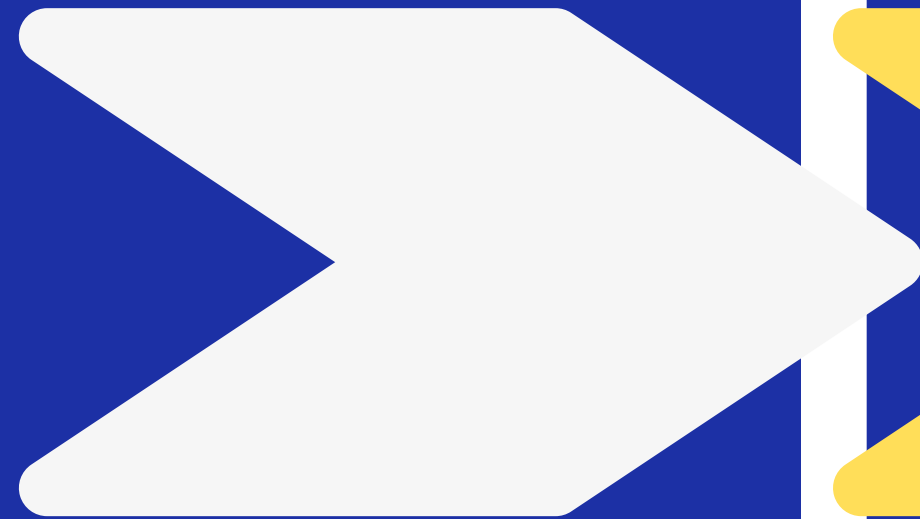


What are the best methods to improve communication & outreach?

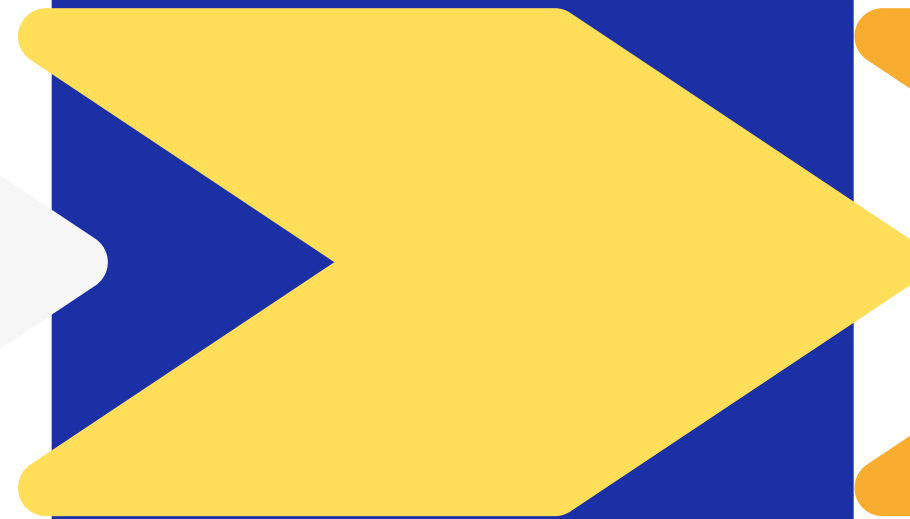
Action step: Increase participation through strategic yet simple marketing and outreach efforts that engage all communities within the neighborhood (age, race, language, and more).

What SOAR did

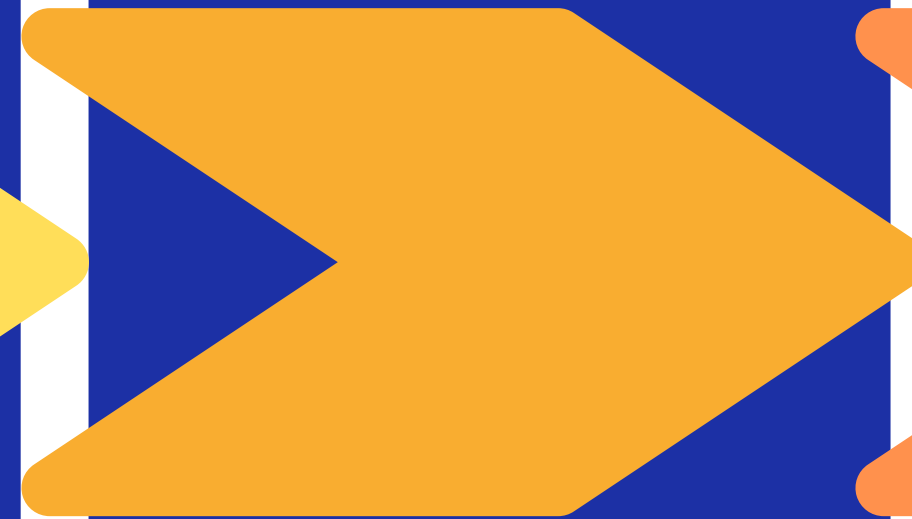
Action items SOAR completed during their pilot project



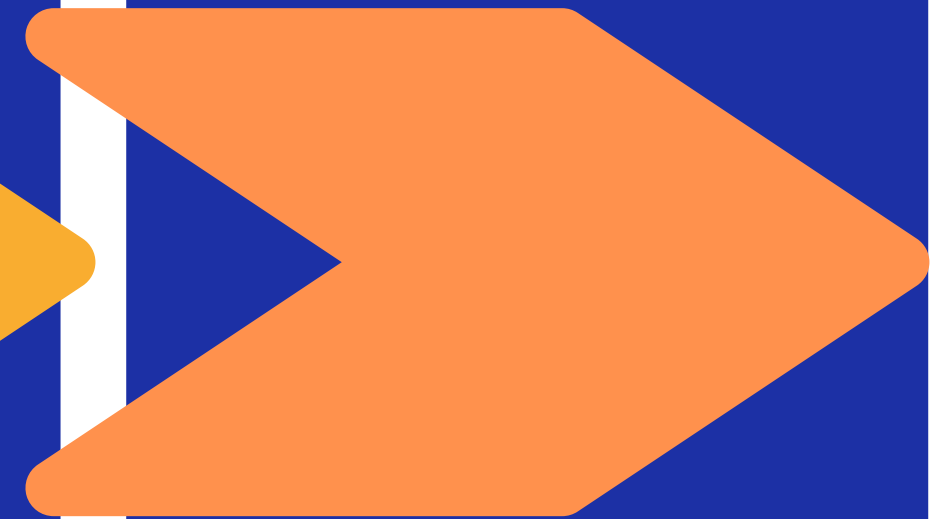
Surveyed over 550 homes in the Southeast Neighborhood through door-to-door canvassing to gain feedback on city and community engagement



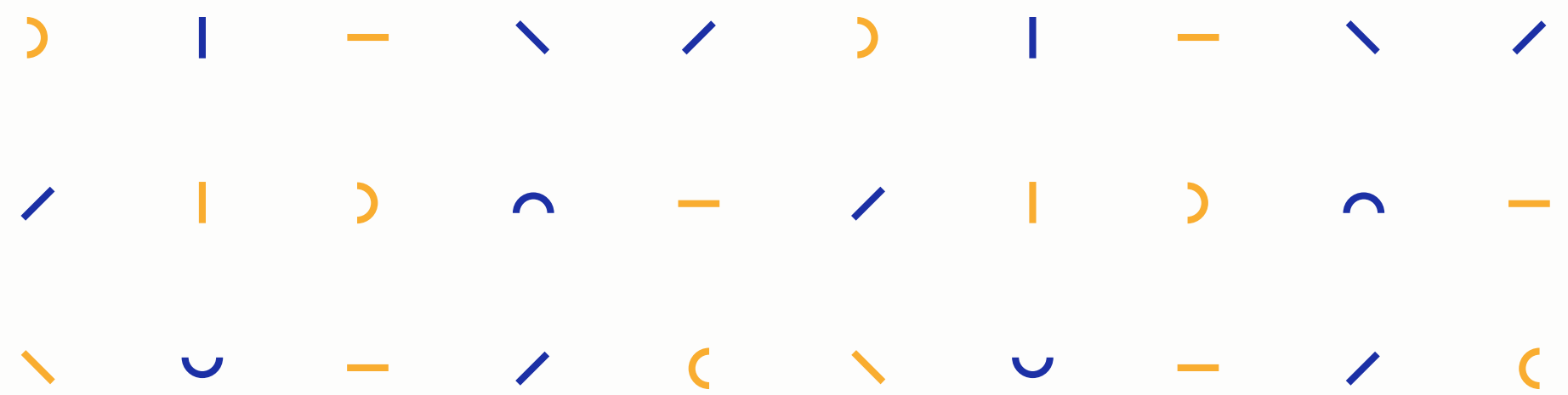
Established hybrid meeting models for in-person & online participation with assistance from the City of South Bend's Engagement & Economic Empowerment team



Collaborated with community organizations to create free digital education training program for residents (see the Resources section for more details!)



Improved communications by designing a new website, creating a Facebook account, & engaging in more community events



How did they do it?

After setting big picture goals, SOAR established their team (see the next page for more details) and set up a project plan.

They outlined the following priorities:

- Define roles and commitment expectations for each of the tasks to be accomplished
- Determine and divide responsibilities for those tasks
- Establish an advisory board of stakeholder representatives
- Determine the timeline and meeting frequencies needed in order to meet goals and milestones



SOAR's Team

Partners

SOAR's partners were crucial to project collaboration, support, and input. They offered services, spaces, money, and time. SOAR divided partners into three categories: Neighborhood Liaisons, Digital Literacy Trainers, and Project Coordinators.

Neighborhood Liaison(s)

Neighborhood Liaisons connect with residents every day. Whether they are out canvassing the neighborhood gathering input from residents or analyzing feedback for neighborhood association improvement, these individuals know the neighborhood by heart.

SOAR recommends filling this role with an individual(s) from the neighborhood who knows the community and its needs well.



Digital Literacy Trainers

Digital Literacy Trainers facilitate the technology support program at the Library. These are young individuals from the neighborhood who are interested in becoming civically engaged with their community, supporting residents with their technology needs, and establishing intergenerational relationships.

SOAR recommends sourcing volunteers from local high schools, as well as National Honors Society, Engineering and Computer Science, or additional volunteering clubs to work with residents on digital education.



Project Coordinators

Project Coordinators keep the entire team moving forward. They pay close attention to the goals and ensure that employed strategies are working. They steer the project in the right direction to achieve milestones, collaborating with all team members simultaneously. In the end, they record and analyze each aspect of the project to provide recommendations for future iterations.

SOAR recommends that a neighborhood representative and volunteer fill this role to collaborate with key stakeholders and bring all the pieces of the puzzle together.





TWO: RESULTS

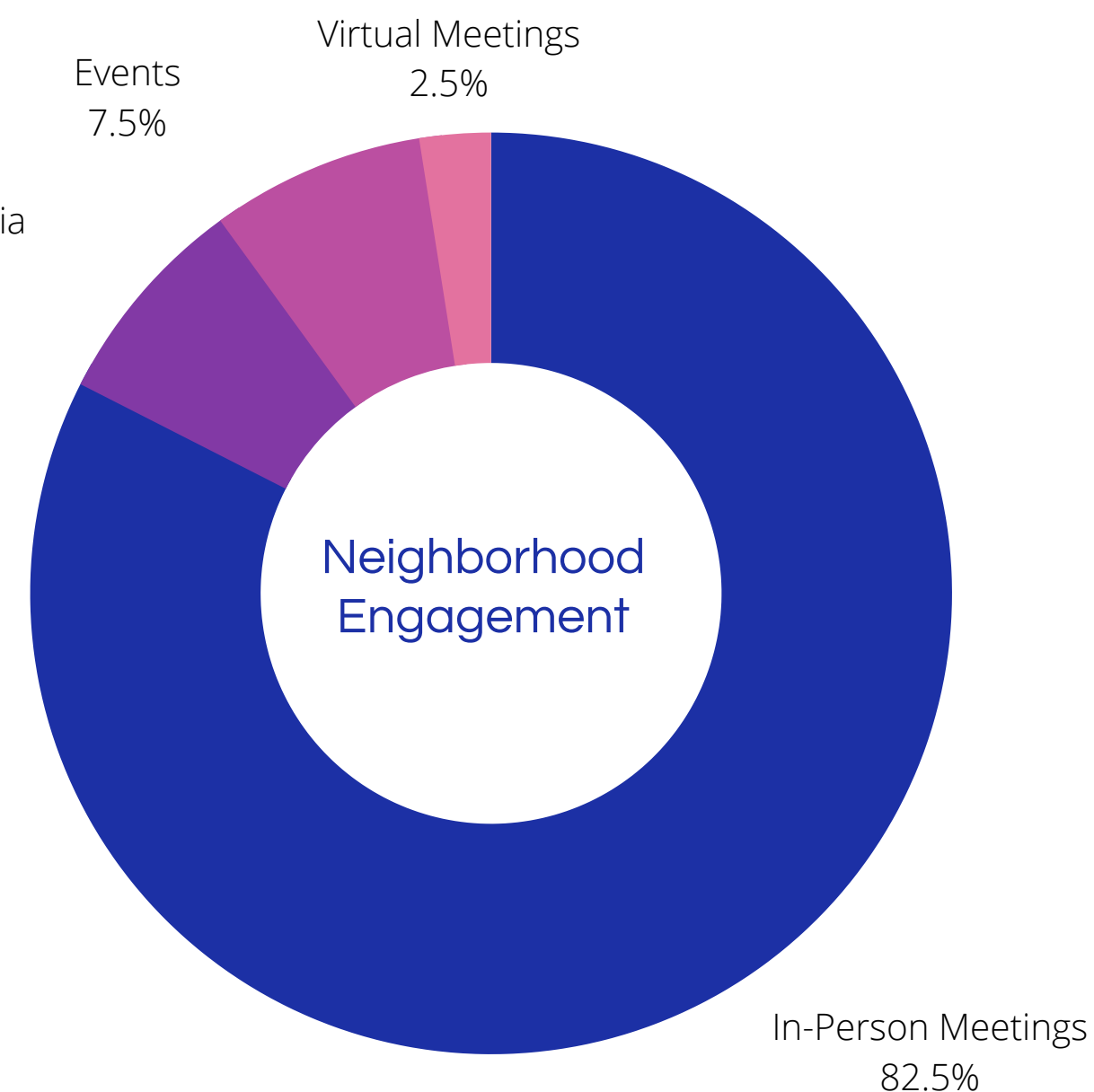
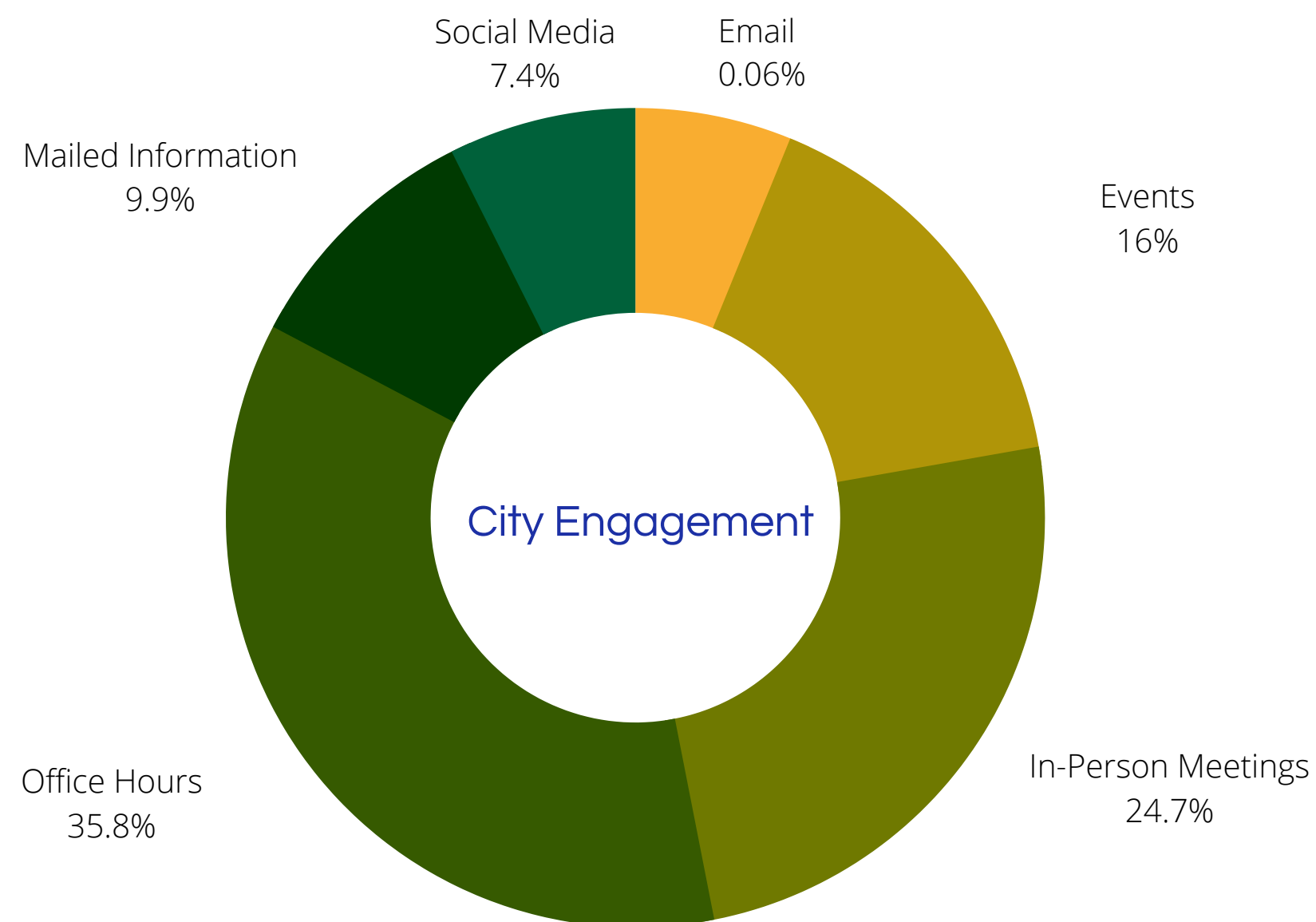
SOAR's Findings





SURVEY QUESTION: How do YOU want to engage with your city and neighborhood?

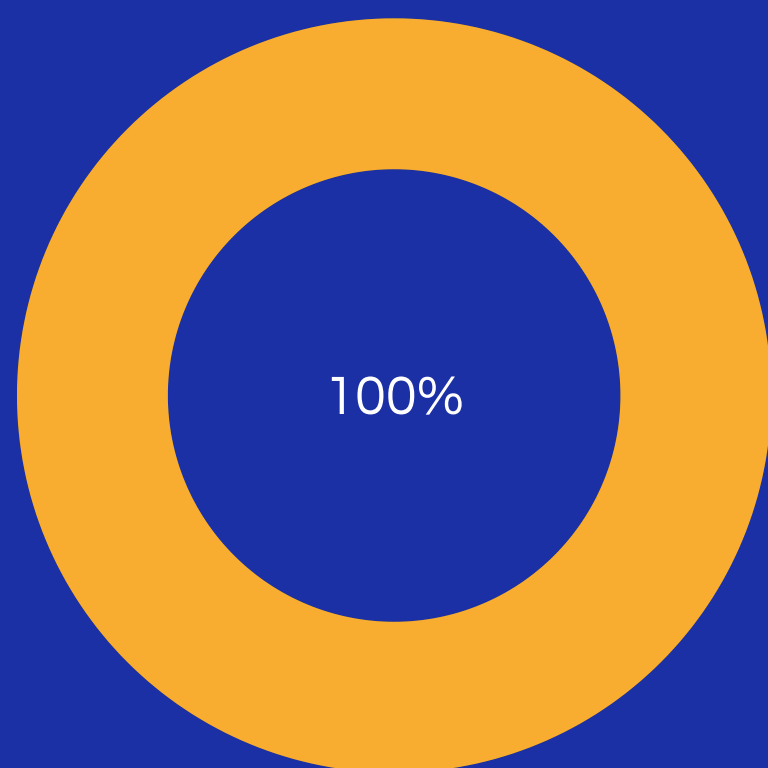
Below are the responses from neighbors during canvassing.



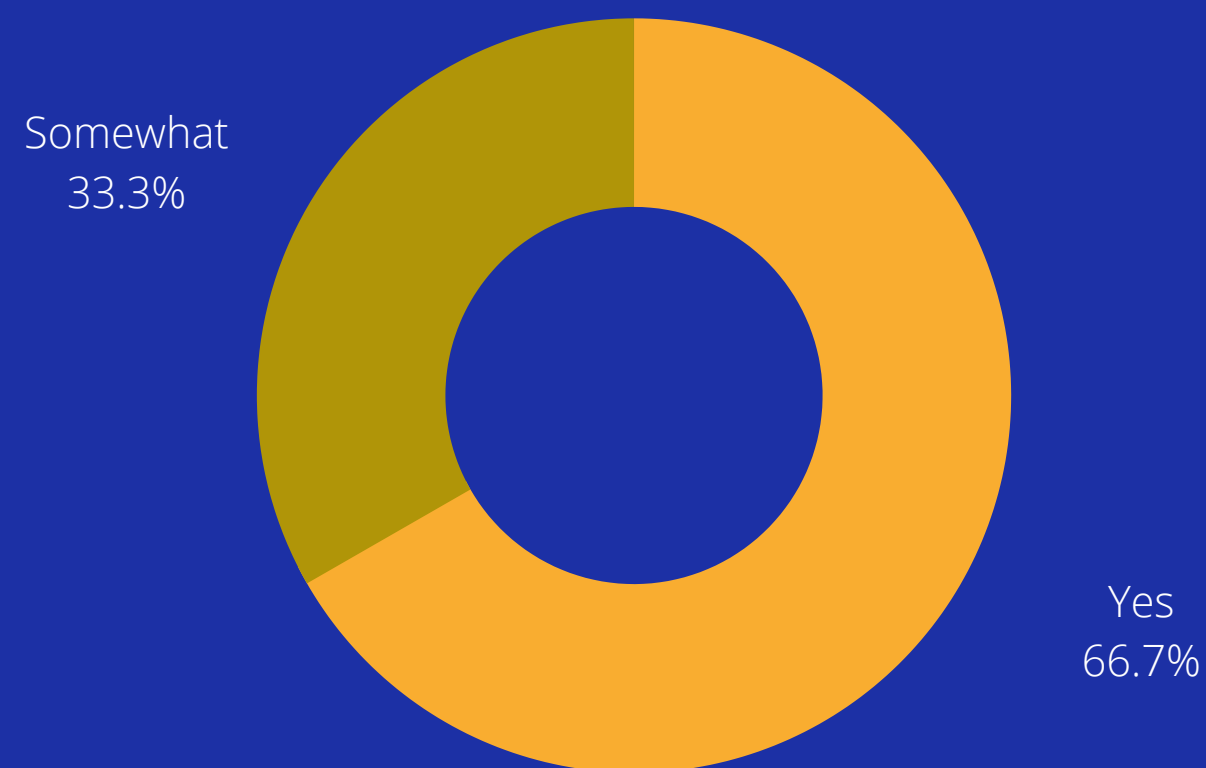
Result: Southeast Neighbors want more in-person meeting and office hours options.



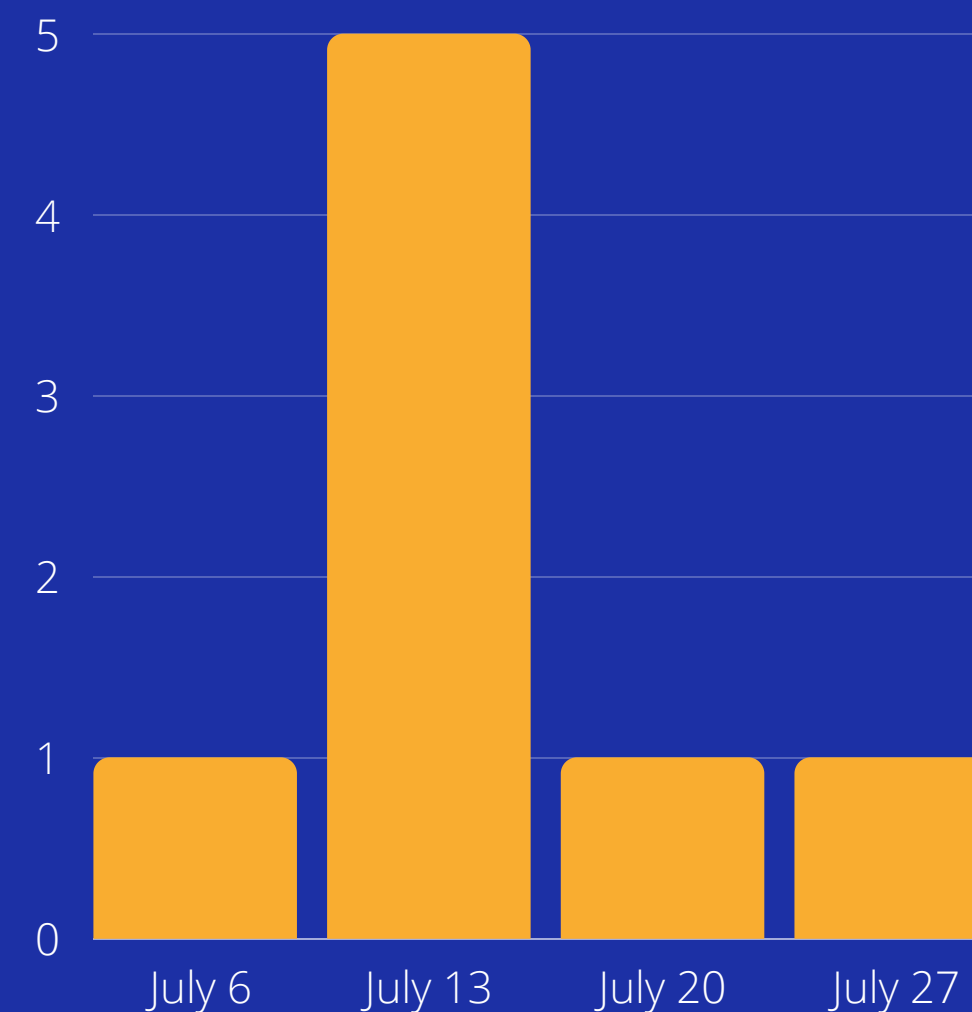
Digital Education Training Question: How can we encourage and cultivate civic and digital literacy?



All of our student trainers said they would recommend the digital literacy courses to other student volunteers



Our student trainers felt they connected and engaged more with their community through training sessions



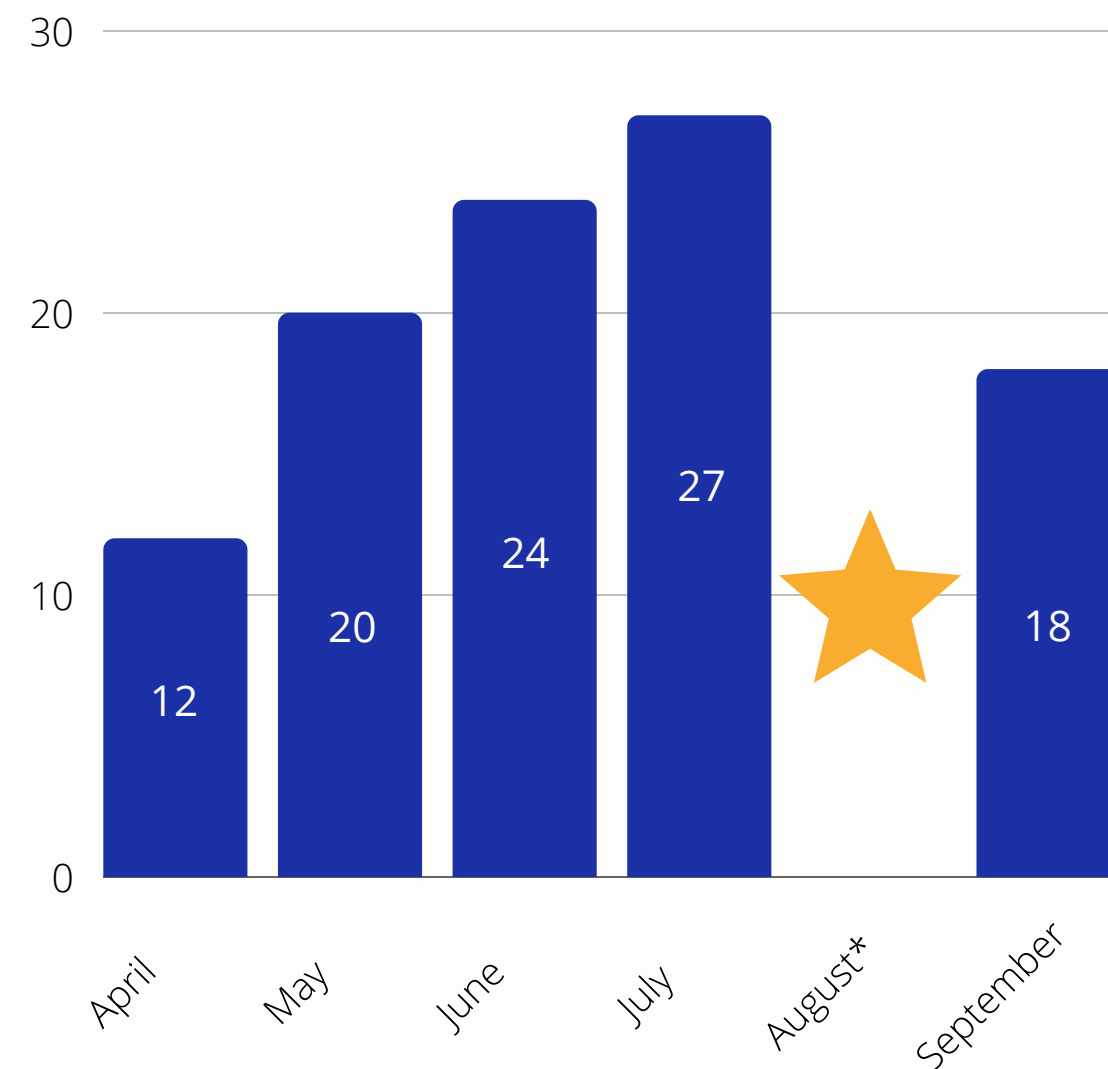
Summer Training Attendance



What are the best methods to improve communication & outreach?

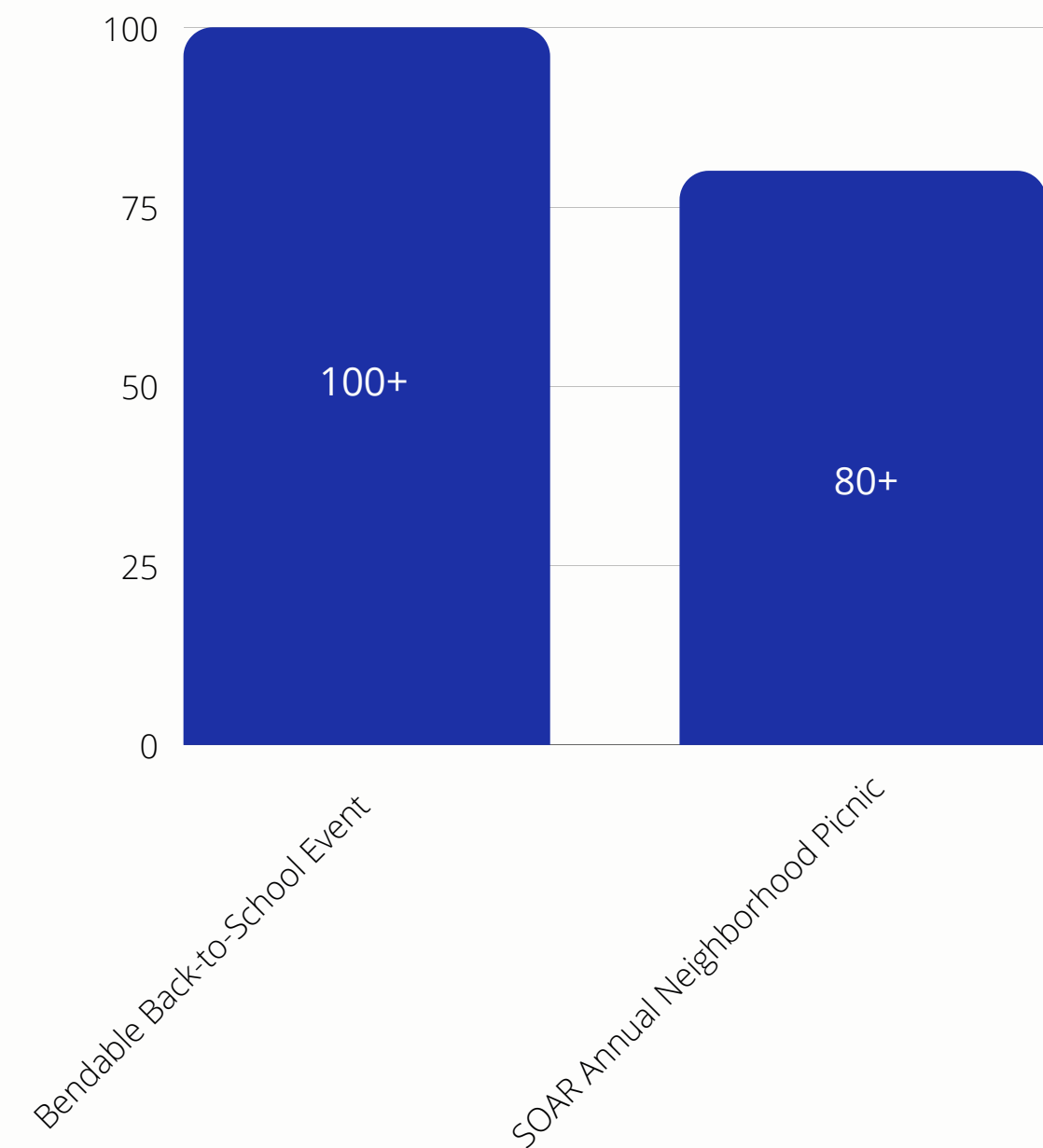
Hybrid meeting model, improved website, community events, and established social media presence

SOAR MEETING ATTENDANCE
(APRIL - SEPTEMBER 2021)



*Community event held in the Southeast Neighborhood with SOAR (during the same time as SOAR's August meeting). Attendance was 100+.

SOAR EVENT ATTENDANCE 2021





THREE: RESOURCES

You can do it, too!



What does the data mean?

SOAR has work left to do. We learned what worked and what didn't resonate with residents.

In this section, we'll break down our key findings, showing you how digital and civic engagement can be improved in your neighborhood. Here are the key findings that we'll cover and that are helpful for all neighborhoods:

1. There are better options than canvassing
2. Hybrid meetings are necessary
3. Digital literacy is for everyone
4. Communications is the key
5. Accept feedback, understand complaints



Finding: There are better options than canvassing

Of the over 550 homes that SOAR canvassed, 75 residents responded to our survey. While those are big numbers, SOAR only had a response success rate of 7.7%.

While canvassing allows for immediate answers in real-time from residents and puts you in direct contact with your neighbors, canvassing is challenging. Here's what we learned and recommend you consider:

1. People simply don't want to talk to strangers. For many people, it's a safety risk to open their doors to strangers and answer questions about their neighborhood, especially when their answers may not be favorable.
2. It is a time-sensitive and demanding task. Canvassing is only effective when homeowners are home, limiting the time frame you can go door-to-door and expect responses. To get meaningful feedback, canvassing demands long periods and days of knocking on doors. It's not an hour-a-day "chore"!
3. Canvassing is labor-intensive and, oftentimes, expensive. Canvassing requires a dedicated group of people who can contribute substantial time to completing the work (ie. if you have a full-time day job, canvassing is nearly impossible). Unless you have a large group of committed volunteers, then you will have to pay to canvass which can quickly up the costs.
4. Canvassing is an art form. You have to be quick, methodical, and concise with your questions while being friendly, open, and patient. It takes real skill!

Key Takeaway: Generally, we have found that there are easier, cheaper, and better ways to get resident feedback than canvassing

Data collection alternatives:

Written questionnaire delivered to residents through the mail.

*Electronic surveys via email or online form.

**Requires access to digital devices and wifi*

Telephone interviews



Finding: Despite a desire for more in-person meetings, hybrid meetings are necessary

People want options! The survey data indicated that the vast majority of people prefer to interact with neighbors through in-person meetings. But after offering both in-person and online meeting sessions, SOAR's attendance increased by 100%! While people have a preference for in-person, for many members the online meetings allowed them more flexibility with their schedules.

Hybrid meetings are inclusive, efficient, and great for record-keeping. Older residents can remain in the comfort of their homes, those with children or residents who are students have flexibility with their schedules, residents who work evenings can participate through recordings of monthly meetings, residents with physical disabilities don't have to worry about transportation to meeting locations, residents who don't have adequate transportation can choose what's best for them, and members can engage safely without risking their health and the health of those around them. Hybrid meetings are also great because residents without wifi or sufficient technology can attend in person, and those without privacy or space in their homes can engage in person.

The list could go on. Ultimately, giving people the power to choose what is best for their situation will help your neighborhood association grow and expand your reach.

Setting up a Hybrid model:

- Purchase a meeting platform membership. The City of South Bend's Engagement & Economic Empowerment team offers grants for online platform membership.
- Establish a designated online meeting coordinator
 - Provides the technology for conducting meetings (SOAR used their president's laptop and rented a big monitor)
 - Ensures the online meeting is recorded and monitors online attendees (ie. if someone has a question, etc.)
- Optional: webcam and microphone
- Location with adequate internet connection



Finding: Digital literacy is for everyone

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TO RESOURCES AND FOSTERING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

As a neighborhood association, SOAR is constantly seeking to recruit members of the community that truly reflect the diverse populations residing in the Southeast neighborhood.

The hardest individuals to reach, among working families and adults, are young residents and students. When we think of the work neighborhood associations do on a daily basis, their long-term goals are often centered along the lines of making their community a better place for future generations. The question is how do we get young people both involved in the community and its betterment – especially when it will directly affect them!

This issue intersects with other areas of need in any neighborhood association:

- People want to engage through multiple platforms with their neighborhood association.
- They need technical support.
- Young people are not as involved in their community.

Recognizing this overlap, SOAR set out to tackle all three challenges through the establishment of free Digital Literacy Training courses at a community location - Tutt Library. However, there are resources in any neighborhood! Look at the schools, youth technology programs, or clubs within your community to help find technical training resources. Also, connect with young people to help with training and technical setup. Not only are young people great at teaching others how to navigate technology (everything from taking pictures to understanding internet safety), but digital training presents the opportunity to become more involved with the neighborhood association!

We recommend that you choose a central community location in your neighborhood to host sessions. Ensure that the location you've chosen has the proper technological devices and internet and provides comfort for participants and student-trainers.

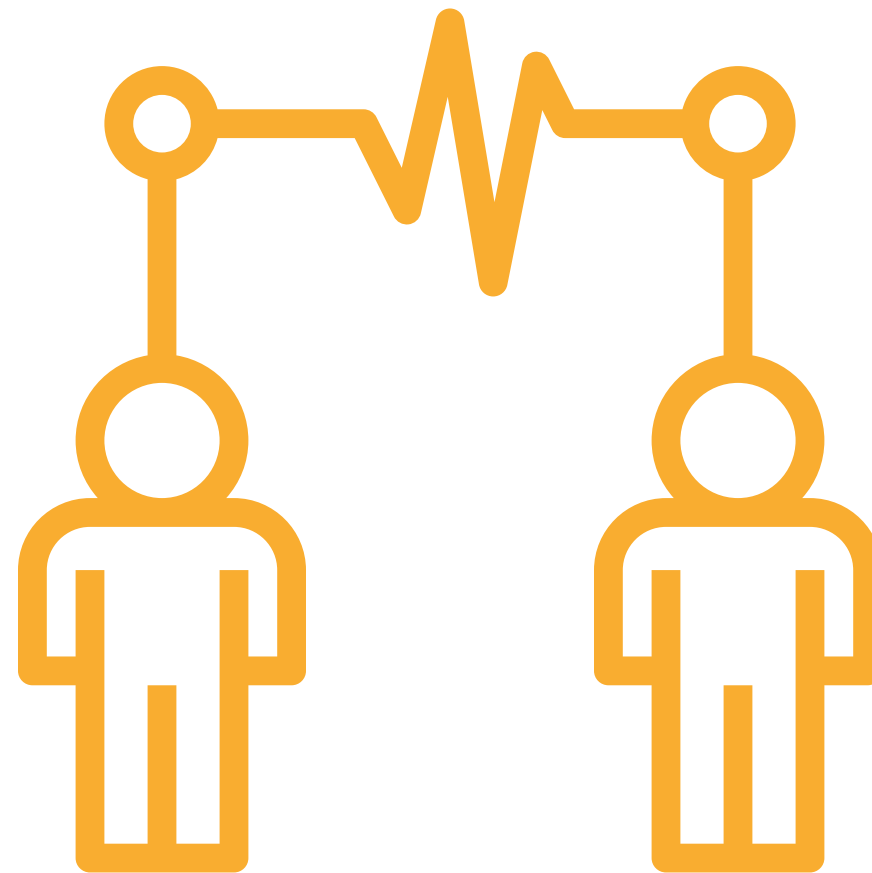
Adapting to a digital world means bringing everyone along with us. We need to create and foster digital equity, which can start right in your community and neighborhood association.

Finding: Communication is the key

Communications should be the heart of your neighborhood association. It goes beyond prompt responses to emails, timely attendance to meetings, and repeating processes consistently, although these are important!

Communication means engaging consistently with your residents through various continually regulated platforms. If you're seeking to not only increase your engagement but also explore new digital avenues to achieve that goal, you need to up the importance of communication.

While it can seem like neighborhood associations pick the same person to respond to all needs, it's important to pick a specific person to maintain all communication channels. Make sure this person not only has an interest, but can also navigate social media, website, and design platforms.



***The EEE team offers resources to help neighborhood associations connect with residents! Check out the "Love Your Block" section on the EEE website:
www.southbendin.gov/EEE***

Website:

Websites are your most important resource. Make sure your website is clean, comprehensible, and easy to maintain. Websites are the first place an interested resident will go to learn more about their neighborhood association. Building a website can take time, but it lasts forever and can easily be updated with instant information.

Social Media:

Social media is another form of creating community, spreading the word, and sharing resources with neighbors. While it can be trickier to monitor behavior and responses, it's important to set perimeters, rules, and shared goals with members and followers to make the most of your social media platform and influence.

Print Communications:

Print communications is perhaps the most common way to connect with neighbors and spread your message. It's reliable and reaches all residents (including those without technology, social media, or internet connection). Although it may take longer and cost more to distribute, it does get the job done with certainty of delivery.

Finding: Accept feedback, understand complaints

One lesson we learned through canvassing and conversations was that it's important to know the difference between constructive feedback versus an individual complaining about neighborhood or city problems.

We must understand that when it comes to addressing and listening to neighbors' concerns for their neighborhood, there are often deep emotions involved. Emotions like this are not simply due to an issue that has perhaps been neglected by officials or miscommunicated with residents, but rather stem from the fact that this is their home.

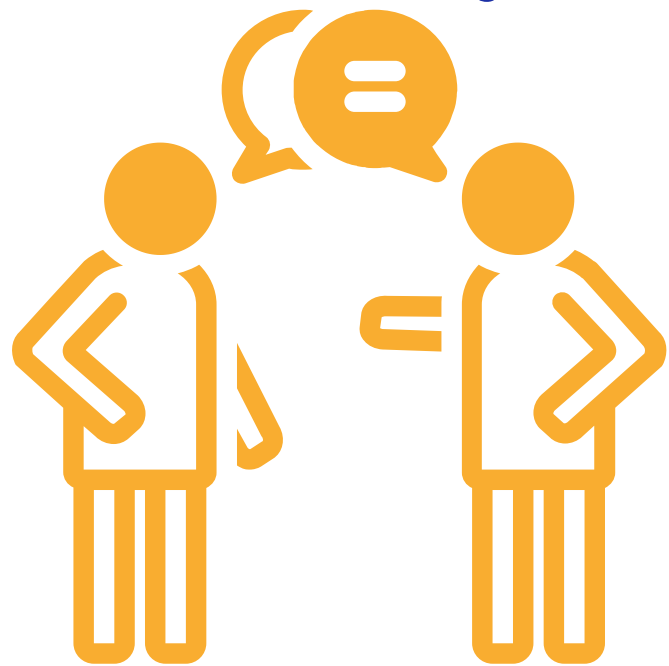
While it can be hard listening to the list of problems that always seem to grow and grow (especially when you're trying to solve these challenges!) it's critical to give those individuals a platform to share their thoughts and emotions. More often than not, it's a sign that they care about their neighborhood. They're on the brink of getting involved, problem-solving WITH you, and creating sustainable solutions.

It's an opportunity to start a dialogue.

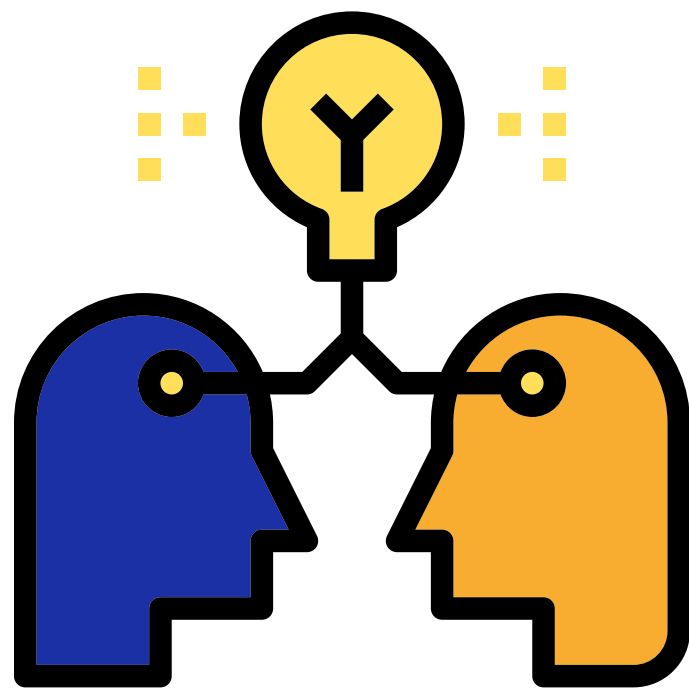
So, how do we tell the two apart?

Constructive feedback: helping to improve, promoting further development or advancement
Complaining: to express dissatisfaction, pain, uneasiness, censure, resentment, or grief; find fault

The difference? Constructive feedback promotes action and improvement; complaining seeks to pin the blame. Find a way to see through the complaining and get the individual involved.



Sharing resources = exponential growth



When our team combined forces – collaborating with new partners, organizations, and community members – we were able to not only learn more about how to improve our efforts towards increased digital and civic engagement but also were ultimately able to create greater, sustainable connections for SOAR. SOAR can continue their work with the help of local youth, digital specialists, support from the City of South Bend for hybrid meetings, local organizations like Bendable to enhance digital literacy, and new community members interested in joining the association.

We hope the Digital Engagement Playbook accomplishes the same exponential growth for your neighborhood association. While every method, practice, program structure, or resource listed in this Toolkit might not work for you, we do hope it serves as a reference for all the possibilities that can be achieved – most importantly, possibilities that work for YOUR neighborhood association and community.

Not all methods were successes for SOAR and that's okay. We learned and then learned again to adapt until we found practices that worked for the Southeast Neighborhood. We encourage you to do the same. While it can feel discouraging at moments, we urge you to take those moments of defeat as an opportunity to explore new ways of connecting and engaging with your residents.

And who knows, perhaps you'll be the next neighborhood association sharing your findings with other neighborhoods attempting to increase their engagement! Sharing resources is not just how we improve our neighborhoods, but our entire city community as well.

Resources for YOU

Local Resources

THE CITY OF SOUTH BEND

- 311 CITY SERVICES
- NEIGHBORHOOD CONSORTIUM

Link: <https://www.southbendin.gov/>

THE CITY OF SOUTH BEND'S ENGAGEMENT & ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT TEAM

- SERVICE CATALOG WITH PRINTING & DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT SERVICES, AMONG MANY OTHERS!

Link: <https://southbendin.gov/eee>

NEIGHBORHOOD RESOURCES CONNECTION SOUTH BEND

Link: <https://www.nrscsb.org/>

BENDABLE

Link: <https://www.bendable.com/>

National Resources

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

Link: <https://www.nlc.org/>

A GUIDE FOR STARTING A SUCCESSFUL NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Link: <https://www.accgov.com/>

OTHER NATIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION PLAYBOOKS (EXAMPLES BELOW)

- ***ATLANTA COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAYBOOK***

- Link: <http://ourcommunity.is/engaged/>

- ***SAN FRANCISCO'S DIGITAL EQUITY PLAYBOOK***

- Link: <https://sfmohcd.org/>

- ***BKLYNCONNECT PLAYBOOK: A RESOURCE FOR RESEARCHING, DESIGNING, AND IMPLEMENTING A PUBLIC WIFI PILOT PROGRAM IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD***

- Link: <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/>

Resources for YOU continued



Digital Resources

VINTEUM - COMMUNICATIONS DESIGN GEARED FOR COMMUNITIES

Link: <https://vinteam.io/>

WEBSITE BUILDING DOMAINS:

- wix.com
- weebly.com
- squarespace.com

DIGITAL MARKETING INSTITUTE: ***THE VALUE OF BUILDING A SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNITY...*** AND OTHER COURSES

Link: <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/>

Nextdoor (SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITE)

Link: <https://nextdoor.com/>

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES:

PRACTICES FOR ENGAGEMENT IN THE TIME OF COVID

Link: <https://www.slc.gov/can/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2020/04/Best-Practices-for-Engagement-During-COVID-19.pdf>

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Link: <https://www.mobilize.io/blog/best-practices-for-community-engagement/>

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND A GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Link: <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102820/community-engagement-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond.pdf>



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